Chapter 10

Use of Smartphones for Self-Regulated Foreign Language Learning Activities

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones can significantly affect the development of foreign languages in two distinct ways. Firstly, online informal learning of languages may result in naturalistic foreign language acquisition while mobile assisted language learning implies the use of smartphones following a conscious decision to engage in language learning activities that would result in the improvement of one’s language competence. Based on quantitative and qualitative methodology applied on a sample of undergraduate students in Slovenia, the main objective of this chapter is to explore the use of smartphones for self-regulated English language learning activities beyond the language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The device that young adults are most likely to use to access internet content is their smartphone or “mobile supercomputer” (Abdous, Facer, & Yen, 2012; Leis, Tohei, & Cooke, 2015). In fact, already in 2012 more young people used the internet every day than computers, which indicates online access through mobile devices (Eurostat, 2016). Within just a few years, smartphones have developed from niche items into the primary devices used to access online resources. However, the fact that younger generations daily use smartphones to access internet content to meet their personal needs does not necessarily imply that they will willingly embrace mobile resources for learning (Stockwell, 2008; Lyrigkou, 2018).

Smartphone activities involving language use fall under the umbrella of two concepts. The first is online informal learning of languages, in particular of English as one of the predominant languages of the online world. Online informal learning of English was defined by Sockett and Toffoli (2012) as the result of activities that users of English perform online and that involve exposure to language input as
well as language production and interaction in a variety of authentic communicative events. In this chapter, language development that results from engagement in online informal learning of languages where learning the language is not the primary focus of the activity will be referred to as language acquisition (Krashen, 1982), seen as emulating the process of acquisition of one’s mother tongue. The attention of the language user is placed on the meaning rather than linguistic form, and takes place during authentic language reception, production, or interaction activities in the physical or virtual environment. In fact, this type of learning is similar to language development in naturalistic settings (Kusyk, 2017; Sockett & Kusyk, 2015). Learning the language in this case is not the primary focus of users that access online content with other professionally or personally relevant objectives in mind (for example, to watch YouTube clips for entertainment purposes). Nevertheless, some studies show that experienced language users will engage in online informal activities with a primary or secondary aim to learn the language (Jurković, 2019; Trinder, 2017).

The main focus of this chapter is the second relevant concept when discussing the use of smartphones for activities involving language use. This is mobile assisted language learning or “the use of mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where device portability offers specific advantages” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013, p. 3701). The use of smartphones with a primary intention of improving one’s language competence will be referred to as language learning (Krashen, 1982), seen as that part of the process of language development that is conscious in nature, places attention on the language form and not only meaning, and usually takes place in classroom settings or regulated by others, for instance teachers. In the case of self-regulated language learning through smartphones, the main objective of the smartphone user is to access resources that will support conscious language learning and enable them to place the learning focus on the language form, for example using smartphone apps, visiting websites with language learning exercises and tasks, or accessing online dictionaries.

The three most frequently addressed research topics in mobile assisted language learning studies so far have been teaching vocabulary, the usability of mobile assisted language learning systems, and (existing and potential) user stances toward mobile assisted language learning (Duman, Orhon, and Gedik, 2015). In most studies made into the effects of mobile assisted language learning on language development (recently, for example, Çakmak and Erçetin, 2018; Cho, Lee, Joo, and Becker, 2018; Seibert, Hanson, and Brown, 2019), the learning was teacher- or researcher-regulated. This means that these studies do not reflect the language learning activities that smartphone users engage in when their learning is not dictated by others, i.e., when it is self-regulated.

From a theoretical standpoint, this chapter can be understood within the framework of the theory of agency, especially given that language learner agency is essential to language learning development (McLoughlin, 2016) in the language classroom and beyond (Lai, 2015; Paiva, 2011). As defined by Duff (2012), agency refers to an individual’s ability to make choices, take control of their own actions, self-regulate their learning activities, and pursue their individually set goals. In addition, agency can be related to leaner autonomy, motivation, and self-efficacy (Sade, 2011).

Within the theory of agency, language learners are viewed as active participants in their own personal language learning process (Kukulska-Hulme, 2016). In turn, self-regulation is understood as the degree of active participation of the language learners in their own learning (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). From the perspective of the complex dynamic systems theory, agency can be understood as a system that is relational or always linked to the affordances provided by the context in which learning takes place, emergent or characterised by the possibility to develop, spatially and temporally situated, achievable by means of the learning environment, changeable through iteration and co-adaptation, mul-
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